

Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness by M. Remi Yergeau. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017, 302 pp, \$104.95 cloth, \$27.95 paper.

Sam Kizer

“Are you, dear reader, autistic or nonautistic? Can there ever really be any in-between?” M. Remi Yergeau’s *Authoring Autism* dives into this messy paradigm—indeed, the “figurative shit that contemporary autism discourse has flung upon autistic bodies”—to interrogate how autism illuminates dominant rhetoric (2). Autism is not simply an object of inquiry but rather a mode of analysis, a rhetorical invention in and of itself, so autistic people are rhetors who are always already queering rhetoric about them. With vivid imagery, personal storytelling, rhetorical theorization, and a steady undercurrent of advocacy, Yergeau argues that autism destabilizes everything we think we know about rhetoric and vice versa, and that therefore scholars of rhetoric and of autism must disrupt their assumptions about both.

The monograph is developed around six sections, each of which builds on and complicates the previous to further demonstrate autism as a mode of rhetorical queerness and instability. In the introduction, “Involution,” Yergeau explores how autism is often understood as an array of symptoms that hinder one’s ability to communicate. Autism is deemed unintentional, involuntary, uncoordinated, and intrusive, and therefore autistic people are considered non-rhetorical beings; in turn, dehumanizing and infantilizing autistic people is more easily justified (11). Interestingly, it is through analyzing these apparent disconnects between autism and rhetoric that the restrictive and prescriptive limits of both are revealed. Contesting those limits is precisely the project that Yergeau undertakes.

In chapter 1, “Intention,” Yergeau takes to task the cultural imperative that rhetoric and autism be gauged against sociality, and therefore challenges dominant notions of theory of mind. They chiefly question Simon Baron-Cohen’s “extreme male brain” theory, which posits that autistic people are obsessed with details, are overly rational, and are seriously uninterested in others. Such a theory assumes that intentional use of language is the benchmark by which autism and rhetoric are gauged. Forming relationships with other people and building communities through those relationships seems inseparable from normative speech, but Yergeau is quick to trouble this approach to sociality, arguing that it has long been used (and continues to be used) to violently force people to conform or be excluded (86). A similar theme pervades the discussion in chapter 2, “Intervention,” in which Yergeau interrogates applied behavioral analysis (ABA) therapy commonly deployed against autistic people in an attempt to

make them more *normal*. ABA insists that sociality is a goal autistic people must reach—which they currently lack and will be less-than-human without—effectively situating autistic people as queer subjects in need of intervention in similar ways to how conversion therapy positions gay subjects in need of straightening (100). Autism and queerness are not only entangled but are co-constituted: to examine one is to examine the other while simultaneously questioning rhetoric, and to *be* them is thus rhetorical. Yergeau labels this constellation neuroqueer, and it undergirds the remainder of their argument.

Chapters 3 and 4, “Invitation” and “Invention,” deploy the concept of neuroqueer to complicate ideas about invitational rhetoric. Nowhere is this complication more apparent than in disclosing one’s autistic identity. For autistic people to disclose their autism—their neuroqueerness—is to invite scrutiny upon that identity. If, as Yergeau argued earlier, autistic people are dominantly understood as being non-rhetorical, then for them to disclose their own identity means that they are taking command of some agency over their own life narrative, which is rhetorical. Such logic suggests that autism is always already illegible to non-autistics, so autistic people can never be fully credible. However, neuroqueering all manner of autistic communication—from stimming to echophenomena to meltdown—reveals that “autism is a negotiation between rhetorical and arhetorical worlds” and that resisting the notion that rhetoric *means* something is crucial to understanding autism as rhetoric (205). Autism is demi-rhetorical, continually being invented and reinvented, meaningful and meaningless, queer.

Throughout the text, Yergeau is attentive to heteronormativity and the ways in which it became embedded in discourses surrounding autism and in rhetoric; indeed, the neuroqueer analytic depends on resisting heteronormativity, and Yergeau does an excellent job throughout of highlighting how autistic people achieve this just by being autistic. Yergeau also makes well-researched parallels between autism advocacy and gay rights movements, not only in the ways they engage coalition-building logics but also how systems of privilege and oppression foreground both (179). They build open those parallels to explore how and why many autistic people identify as queer—a crucial juncture to develop the neuroqueer analytic presented in the book. Some attention is similarly given to matters of race, especially with regard to how autism is closely associated with whiteness and its attending discourses tied to white supremacy (41, 49, 157–58); however, further interrogation is needed on how to effectively deploy the neuroqueer analytic in engaging autistic people of color to better integrate their voices into conversations about demi-rhetoricity and neuroqueerness.

Yergeau’s attention to neuroqueer sets their monograph apart from other scholarship in rhetoric, queer theory, and autism studies and points to a necessary critical shift for all three. In neuroqueering autism as rhetoric and rhetoric as autism, they make clear that autistic ethnography (the *autistethnographic*) disorients (212). When autistic people tell their own stories, they cannot be mapped onto existing understandings of rhetoric. When non-autistic people tell

autistic peoples' stories for them, they impose a narrow, restrictive rhetoric onto autistic bodyminds. Resisting such paradigms must be central to triangulating autism, queerness, and rhetoric.

Asexuality studies (and asexual people) may find Yergeau's theorization of the neuroqueer particularly useful. Asexuality, like autism, exists as both hyper-visible and invisible in rhetoric and in culture, so analyzing it as a process of (re)invention rather than merely a constructed identity can yield deeper understandings of how asexuality exists within and beyond rhetoric. The neuroqueer analytic will also prove useful in interrogating the narrative of autistic people as asexual. If both asexuality and autism are queering processes that simultaneously fit into and fall outside of rhetoric, then the relationships between them cannot be static and therefore should not be assumed. That is not to say that autistic people are not asexual—indeed, many are—but to assume as much ignores the rhetorical messiness that asexuality and autism both embody. A neuroqueer analysis can guide scholars to more nuanced ideas of how autism and asexuality are entangled and, importantly, how they are rhetorically disparate.

A neuroqueer framework opens new possibilities to theorize autism as a mode of rhetorical multiplicity: each relationship we develop with ourselves, other people, other autistic people, animals, environments, histories, futures—all places, spaces, and affects—is unfixed. Existing theories of rhetoric cannot account for such idiosyncrasy. Interrogating autism as multiple, demi-rhetorical and arhetorical, and neuroqueer grants theorists (including autistic people, who are theorists of their own bodyminds) agency to explore rhetoric as relational without an imperative that it make meaning, and *Authoring Autism* is a fascinating foray into how rhetoric can learn from autism to move beyond its current restrictive rationale.

Sam Kizer is an associate instructor and doctoral candidate in the Department of Gender Studies at Indiana University Bloomington. In his dissertation, he plans to explore how autistic college students negotiate sexuality, from where they get knowledge about sex and sexuality, and how they narrate their sexual desires, needs, and experiences. He can be reached at samkizer@iu.edu.